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Shaker Regional School Board hears perks of online networking

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Members of the Shaker Regional School Board were given a crash course on some of the newest technology and software that students are integrating in the classroom and other assignments. Social networking through online based programs, such as Facebook, have become more than just a way for friends to keep in touch, but a way for students to interact with one another for educational purposes and in some instances, communication between teachers and students.

English teacher Alison Bryant is one of the teachers who is a part of the Facebook social networking website. She told the board that the website has helped communication among students and herself since many of the students are members as well, which makes it an easy medium to use.

"It has been really helpful when advertising school events," said Bryant. "I can also help out students with questions that they might have on homework if we're both online at the same time."

Bryant said that using the website is great to get information about events happening in the school, such as a drama shows or school dances. It allows students to RSVP to events, giving people an approximate number students who might show for the event.

Facebook began as a social network only open to the university and college students when it debuted in 2004. The popularity of the website grew at an astonishing rate and to keep up with its competitors, it had to branch out to the general public. Facebook allows people to send messages similar to e-mail as well as post events, photos, videos and blogs. There is an also an instant messaging element to the website that allows people to chat to one another if both parties are online.

"Sometimes I'll have students ask me questions about assignments and I can answer them immediately online," Bryant said.

Facebook is being used as a tool by some teachers, but new software is currently in the development stage that will bring a whole new twist on teaching.

Math teacher Randy Wormald has been working with a small group of high school students using new social networking software that would be specific to education. The software is still in the working stages, but is being piloted by small samples of students around the world. The name of the software is uSync, which is a combination of Facebook and the personal video broadcasting website Youtube.com, which is put into a safe environment for students. It is safe in the way that each school has their own network that only allow students from that school to join.

"The difference between Facebook and uSync is the security and educational aspect," Wormald said.

In addition, uSync would incorporate an educational tool that would allow students to build online projects together, exchange ideas and make presentations with the latest technology. Students would be directly in charge of managing projects by assigning different roles to complete the work. Interactive elements that students can use to build projects include blogs, videos, photos, podcasts along with tables and charts. Wormald said that the students he's been working with have utilized the software efficiently and thinks it will be a great tool once it is released.